A

LETTER

TO

THE SOCIETY OF PROTESTANT DISSENTERS,

AT THE

OLD MEETING, YARMOUTH,

FROM

THOMAS MARTIN,

ON HIS RESIGNATION OF THE OFFICE OF MINISTER AMONG THEM.

Ye ſhall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.

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BRITISH MUSEUM
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LETTER, &c.

DEAR FRIENDS,

IT is now ſome months ſince the reaſons were communicated to you, why I was induced to wiſh the continuance of the connexion between us, notwithſtanding a change in my opinion with regard to the probable origin of chriſtianity. While the diſſatisfaction on this account, expreſſed by individuals among you, has led to my reſignation, the ſupport of a very reſpectable majority will always be recollected by me with the ſincereſt pleaſure.

The importance of the profeſſion of a public inſtructor; my perſonal attachment to that

profeſſion; our mutually agreeable connexion; our diſſent from teſts, and defence of liberality in religion; and added to the whole, the grounds I had for relying upon your concurrence in my favourite, though humble plans of utility; all theſe were conſiderations with me of ſuch a nature, that to relinquiſh my ſituation, ſimply on account of the difference between us in opinion, would have been, in my deliberate conviction, decidedly wrong and culpable.

The hope, above all others, the moſt conducive to whatever is great, and the moſt conſoling throughout whatever is afflictive, is unqueſtionably that of another and a better world. The ſpirit inſpired by a hope like this, is that ſpirit of pure benevolence, which is the only preparative for future happineſs.

All are agreed in admitting the poſſibility of a future ſtate; all, except the vicious, are agreed

agreed in the hope that there will be ſuch a ſtate; and all, except the fooliſh, will conduct themſelves ſo as to attain perfect ſatisfaction on the contemplation of its reality. This alone is the true wiſdom of man; for this alone, amid the diverſity of opinions prevailing in the world, can produce, and ſecure the poſſeſſion of real and permanent happineſs: nor are the purſuits of pleaſure, intereſt, power, or reputation, when compared with it, deſerving a name, or thought. Fixing your attention upon it, accordingly, as the end of all your actions, to which every other is ſubordinate; you will "of yourſelves judge "what is right," ſpeak it, and have "love one "to another:" you will, in other words, be the pure lovers of truth, men of determined integrity; and the real and profeſſed object with you being hence invariably the ſame, you will have for your ſettled and uniform diſpoſition, that of tenderneſs, ſenſibility, and benevolence to all mankind.

So clearly do the different organs of the human frame, to ſay nothing of the numberleſs objects ſurrounding us in nature, appear to me in the light of means adapted to ends, that I conſider my own exiſtence as an adequate proof of the exiſtence of God; and with reſpect to a future ſtate, there certainly is no ſatisfactory method of explaining the ſyſtem of the moral world without it. This conſideration, in my opinion, carries in itſelf ſuch force of argument, as ſhould render it deciſive in its influence upon the conduct. It is, likewiſe, immediately connected with the ſubject which has been the cauſe of our ſeparation. To you, there is no ſatisfactory method of explaining the origin of chriſtianity in the world, without admitting it as miraculous. We are agreed, therefore, in the object of our faith: I have without the chriſtian miracles, the probable truth of a hereafter; and what reflecting believer in them will affirm, that he has more than the probable truth of

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the miracles themſelves? We are agreed, alſo, in the principle of united ſincerity and benevolence, and the faithful exerciſe of the underſtanding, as the only rule of life. Where then, I aſk, to one rational, practical, or conſolatory purpoſe, is the difference between us? Unleſs the probability in favour of the reality of the chriſtian miracles, as deducible from human teſtimony, be greater than the probability in favour of a future ſtate, as deducible from the condition of the moral world, and the benevolence of the Supreme Being, what ſtrength is added, or what advance is made in the proof? The value of probabilities depending, not upon their number, but upon their ſtrength; if you multiply the number to infinity, unleſs you have a ſecond ſuperior in force to the firſt, you are ſtill preciſely where you began. This, however, is not all. Becauſe I have no longer been able to maintain the miracles of chriſtianity, ſhall I, therefore, abandon the

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weighty and momentous truths incorporated with it? By no means: give me *the true and right*, and this only, wherever I find it. Becauſe a Dignitary of the Church of England* has relinquiſhed the idea of a miraculous communication as applied to the morality of the goſpels, has he, therefore, relinquiſhed the morality itſelf, or with a childiſh pettiſhneſs, thrown it away as irrational, becauſe it ceaſed to appear to him revealed? By eſtabliſhing it as the fixed ſtandard of duty on the ground of its rationality, he has rendered the moſt eſſential ſervice to an age approaching to the period, when the preſiding Authority will be the Underſtanding.

Of the ſpirit and object of chriſtianity, I entertain the ſame views with thoſe who believe in its miraculous origin. The charac-

* Dr. *Paley*. See View of the Evid. of Chriſt. vol. ii. 24—28. Edit. 1.

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ter of the founder of it, I venerate as the moſt exalted of any I have ever known, or read of. The principle by which he was actuated, I conſider as that of the moral reformation of the world; and I regard thoſe as his followers, whatever may be their opinions, who adopt this principle and apply it.

On the change of my opinion with reſpect to the miracles attributed to the great and good, the extra-ordinary, but as I believe, not præter-natural Jeſus, you were undoubtedly at liberty either to continue the connexion between us, or to diſſolve it: nor while, in the higheſt degree, I approve your manly, rational, and diſtinguiſhed liberality, do I blame the determination of thoſe of your body, who, exerciſing the right of judging, not only of the truth and importance of their opinions, but of the methods by which they may be moſt ſucceſsfully propagated,

pagated, declared that they ſhould themſelves ſecede, unleſs I were ſeparated from you. To inform himſelf fully and impartially, and, thus informed, to adhere to his own honeſt judgment, is the firſt duty of man. I have only to lament the different light in which the ſubject appeared to them, from that in which it appeared equally to me, to a Colleague endeared to me by every poſſible tie of integrity, liberality, and friendſhip,* and to ſo large a majority of you, and to receive with due thankfulneſs, their expreſſions of reſpect and eſteem.

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* Among other remarks of a ſimilar nature, he ſaid to me on the occaſion: "With reſpect to the idea of *your* mode "of conducting the ſervices being ſuppoſed unpleaſant to me, "*mine* might juſt as well be ſuppoſed unpleaſant to you: no, "let every man enjoy his own opinions." A ſeparation between us, he ſaid, might not unfitly be compared to one between a couple of builders, who ſhould quarrel and diſunite about the ſcaffolding to be uſed in erecting the ſame edifice.

The right, in the common acceptation of the word, of eſtabliſhing a teſt upon the ſubject, to the excluſion of every other conſideration, is indiſputable. The queſtion is, not the right, but the reaſonableneſs; the natural tendency and conſequences of ſuch a meaſure; and whether, upon this ground, it be entitled to countenance and ſupport?

Neither my ſervices, nor my conduct, having been diſapproved of by the gentlemen to whom I have referred, what alone I have contended for is, that in the difference ſubſiſting between us in opinion, there exiſted no ſufficient ground for a ſeparation. My invitation, in the words in which it is expreſſed, was ſolely as "a Miniſter, an In-"ſtructor and Aſſociate, to the Attendants on "public worſhip at the Old Meeting, at Yar-"mouth, jointly with Filby."* In this connexion, the principle which I received for

* A ſmall village in the neighbourhood.

my regulation, unaccompanied with any preſcription of opinions, was that of "an unre-"ſtrained conduct of virtue, integrity and "ſincerity." Thus happily, as I appeared to myſelf, at liberty with reſpect to opinions, I had neither valued myſelf on account of them, nor concealed them. Regarding with the late Dr. *Price*, "the rage for proſelytiſm" as "one of the curſes of the world;" I had alſo with him, wiſhed to make "no proſelytes "except to candour, and charity, and honeſt "enquiry." No opinions entertained by me had interfered with the ſatisfactory conducting of the ſervices:* and the real difference in opinion

* The delivering of the Sacrament was voluntarily undertaken by my Colleague. As a mean of virtue, indeed, I could with pleaſure have united in it, and of courſe have delivered it, at any time. My object would have been that of inducing or reviving affectionate veneration for the greateſt and firſt of characters exhibited in the world, than whom no other teacher and reformer ever ſo effectually excited attention to important truth, and the hiſtory of whom, whatever may be

opinion between us, was, in weight and force, as already ſtated. Where, then, was the ground for the termination of a connexion, which, if I may judge no leſs from the friendly and attentive treatment I had ſo uniformly experienced, than from their declarations when they ſignified their intention to ſecede, was on every conſideration except that of opinions, eligible and deſirable, equally to them as to myſelf? Where, in theſe circumſtances, was the inconſiſtency, or incongruity, of the connexion? Our path through life lies in preciſely the ſame direction. Our object is the ſame, and the means by which it is to be obtained are the ſame, whether the knowledge of theſe means be derived immediately from

be the ſtate in which it remains to us, it is impoſſible to read without becoming a better man. That I had declined it, was ſolely for the ſake of preventing miſapprehenſions; and my opinions being eventually too well-known to admit the poſſibility of miſtake, there no longer remained to me a difficulty upon the ſubject.

the Supreme Being, or from the reflections of wiſdom upon experience; whether they be purſued on natural, or on ſupernatural grounds; as rational, or as revealed. The man, alſo, who would violate the dictates of his underſtanding, would violate the commands of God himſelf.

If, on the change of my opinions, I had found it to be by any means a general wiſh among you, that I ſhould relinquiſh my ſituation, I ſhould have immediately complied, however as a friend with friends I might have ſtated my conviction of the erroneouſneſs and pernicious conſequences of the principle, upon which that wiſh muſt have proceded: the right of judging for yourſelves being inviolable, I ſhould have obeyed. The general wiſh expreſſed by you was, however, far different from this: nor could any encouragement be more cordial and affectionate, than that which I received from numbers among you

you, by no means of the ſame opinions with myſelf, to perſevere in the continuance of the connexion. United with me in the great, governing and immutable principles of duty, the liberty of opinion you had the candour to vindicate for me, you would have had the firmneſs to vindicate for yourſelves.

To acquieſce in the bare advancement of nothing contrary to our opinions, can be the reſult only of a dependence, or of a feebleneſs, ſuperiority to which is the firſt requiſite in character; one example of the influence of truth upon the mind, invariably containing within itſelf the ſeeds of a better effect, than is at all to be accompliſhed by a life of concealment, management and diſguiſe: not to inſiſt upon the rareneſs, with which the concealment of religious ſentiments has been found to ſubſiſt without an intereſt at the bottom, or upon the inconſiſtency and ſelf-con-

condemnation of inculcating ſincerity and openneſs of heart in the intercourſes of life, while in the very principle of the perſon who ſhall thus conduct himſelf, there exiſts a conſciouſneſs of its ſyſtematic and habitual violation. Indiſputably there is no other path to virtue, than that of truth.

O for that great æra of wiſdom, when every thing in the form or ſpirit of a creed, ſhall be univerſally diſcarded; when the enſnaring and corrupting influence of teſts, ſhall be annihilated; when upon the true and liberal ground of rectitude, ſervices and conduct ſhall be the only conſiderations for which the inſtructors of the public are reſponſible; and no longer loſing in the miniſter the man, there ſhall be acknowledged and ſecured, equally and alike to all, the liberty of forming and communicating their own opinions!

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There is, confeſſedly, no profeſſion of greater importance to ſociety, than that of a Public Inſtructor. Its objects are, the civilization and improvement of mankind by the formation of the mind and character; the cultivation of the underſtanding, and the regulation of the affections, ſo as moſt effectually to promote in the world, the prevalence of virtue and happineſs. The neceſſity of inſtruction, moreover, in order to the attainment of theſe objects, will ceaſe, only when there ſhall ceaſe to be a ſucceſſion of men: nor is there a more effectual method of communicating ſo ineſtimable a benefit, than to avail ourſelves of the advantages reſulting from habits of attention to it, when conſidered as the occupation of life. Eſſential, however, to the reſpectability, the integrity and ſubſtantial utility, of the profeſſion, is a pure and perfect liberality. Without this, in vain ſhall we expect the deſtruction of hypocriſy, or the progreſs of the

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true ſpirit of chriſtianity. Nothing can be clearer, than that the "offences and cauſes "of ſtumbling," are the allurements ſubſiſting in the world, to the violation of a principle, ſo inſeparably connected with the ſtability and advancement of every other virtue, as ſincerity. Nothing, alſo, can be clearer, than that among the beſt benefactors of the world are to be ranked thoſe, who have contributed moſt to the removal of theſe obſtacles: whence the merit of the primitive Chriſtians, and of the Reformers, in the removal of Heatheniſh, Jewiſh, and Catholic ſuperſtitions. If the Jewiſh religion produced a great and permanent effect, the Chriſtian has unqueſtionably done the ſame. In the ſtatement of the liberal and valuable writer already referred to: "It hath diſpoſed "the world to amendment: it hath put "things in a train." *

* Dr. *Paley*.

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The firſt vital principle of whatever is reſpectable in the human mind, is its freedom in matters of opinion and belief. Violate this, and the office of your Inſtructors, inſtead of the liberal inveſtigation, and the fearleſs advancement of truth, will be that of merely an Advocate, whoſe buſineſs is, to acquaint himſelf with your opinions, to put them into the beſt adapted language, and ſupport them with the moſt convenient arguments. Once, on the contrary, let opinions have their free and full courſe; let every man, and every Clergyman equally with the reſt, unfettered and impartial, enjoy his own; let every check upon the underſtanding, and every ſnare for the conſcience, reſulting from teſts, be removed; and not only will whatever is true and right finally prevail, but by the moſt worthy means, and with the moſt accelerated progreſs. Who, convinced of the truth of his opinions, will ſhrink from the unlimited freedom of diſcuſ-

ſion; and what friend of truth will not be equally the friend of all its followers, how different ſo ever the opinions of others may be from his own? The bond of union between them, independent of the mutability of opinions, conſiſts in a ſteadfaſtneſs in object and principle, in ſpirit and conduct.

Different perſons will, of courſe, form different opinions: it reſults from the condition of man, and, unleſs the ſtandard of judgment dependent upon that condition were in all the ſame, is inevitable. That, alſo, to every man is truth, which to him ſhall appear to be ſuch. As friends, therefore, to truth, the firſt, ſacred, fundamental principle with you, will be to ſecure to all, and among the reſt to your Inſtructors and Aſſociates, the privilege of inveſtigating and communicating it. Oppoſing hypocriſy and prieſtcraft, you will, alſo, oppoſe the reſtrictions upon the communication

nication of opinion, by which they ſubſiſt; and thus, in the moſt promiſing way for attaining the certainty of truth, you will enjoy the beſt advantages of its effect, both upon your own characters, and upon thoſe of all with whom you are connected. As nothing can be more abhorrent from an ingenuous mind, than duplicity; ſo nothing can be more conſonant with it, or more certainly ſecure the cordiality of its affections, than the removal of whatever might ſeem to render neceſſary, or expedient, ſo weak an artifice.

That the moſt important profeſſion in ſociety ſhould be the only profeſſion enſlaved to opinions; that the perſons who, from education and the opportunities of their profeſſion, are the moſt likely to purſue a courſe of enquiry with ſucceſs, ſhould be alone prohibited the avowal of their opinions, if different from the preſcriptive faith; that there

ſhould exiſt in the community, in a word, a practice ſo dangerous to the integrity even of its Teachers, proceeds upon an improvidence, indeed, too obvious and glaring to be long connived at by an enlightened and reforming age. The miſchievous and degrading miſunderſtandings and animoſities concerning the appellations of *Believer* and *Unbeliever*, of *Chriſtian*, *Deiſt* or *Infidel*, will be gone; and reſpecting them where they are reſpectable, and with the author of the parable of the good Samaritan, eſteeming them neither more nor leſs on account of any ſpeculative opinions, as diſtinguiſhed from their actuating principles, we ſhall have in the Teachers of the Public, one entire claſs of completely honeſt men. Their ſervices and their conduct approved, the reaſonableneſs and wiſdom of ſecuring inviolably, to them as well as to others, the liberty of forming and communicating their opinions, will be ſeen and felt;

felt: the reſtraints with reſpect to matters of this kind, will be removed, and the ferments excited by them, will ceaſe of courſe. To uſe the language of Hartley: "Creeds, "articles, &c.—now grow old, and ſeem ready "to die away, and to give place to the wor-"ſhip of God *in ſpirit and in truth;* in which "there is no *Papiſt*, *Proteſtant*, *Lutheran*, *Cal-"viniſt*, *Trinitarian*, *Unitarian*, *Myſtic*, *Metho-"diſt*, *&c.* but all theſe diſtinctions are car-"ried away like the chaff of the ſummer "threſhing-floors."*

My reaſons, then, for expecting the progreſs, and ultimately the general prevalence, of the principle of religious liberty I have deſcribed, are becauſe it is the only principle by which the profeſſion can be regarded in the light of a department in the diviſion

* Obſ. on Man. Vol. II. prop. lxxvi. obſ. 6.

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of labour, liberal and reſpectable; becauſe it is the ſtrongeſt incitement to the cultivation of the underſtanding, and the moſt effectual ſecurity for impartiality and probity; and becauſe it is indiſpenſable to the prevalence of chriſtianity, in its great actuating principle, and in the genuine ſpirit of its founder, as diſtinguiſhed from thoſe of mere believers and profeſſors, with whom it is entirely a ſpeculative propoſition, a name and ſound. May it receive from yourſelves and others, the attention due to its intrinſic worth; and whatever may be the difference of opinions, incident to different ſituations, may knowledge, reaſon, liberality, ſincerity, and benevolence, be the character and the happineſs of man!

For the furtherance of theſe great and moſt important objects, the firſt meaſure is to impart to the young in general, and particularly to the children of the poor, the benefits of rational

tional and virtuous education. There is nothing which, as a general principle, can compenſate for the neglect of ſyſtematic, oral, and familiar inſtruction, addreſſed to claſſes formed upon a ſimilarity of capacity and attainments: nor are the advantages to be eſtimated, which would accrue to ſociety, from regularly and judiciouſly devoting to the purpoſe, even ſo ſmall a portion of time, and one ſo generally at command, as an hour in the morning, and an hour in the evening, of the Sunday.

Superior to the illiberal and ſelf-defeating views of a ſectarian ſpirit, you will cultivate their underſtandings, and form them to upright and valuable characters; referring it to every one to chooſe, each for himſelf, his religion. This is the only method, by which you can ſecure the religion of the heart and life.

From

From a conſciouſneſs of kindneſs to them, you will take an intereſt in their future welfare; from a knowledge of their diſpoſitions and capacities, you will lead them to the employments, for which they may be beſt adapted; and by means of a Library, gradually collected, and to which it will be eaſy to enable them to contribute a ſmall, but regular ſubſcription, you will have furniſhed them with a ſource of entertainment and improvement, and with a bond of union, for life.*

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* Ten perſons of reſpectable education in any pariſh, eſpecially when aſſiſted by the Clergyman, would be abundantly equal to the inſtruction, at the time and in the manner above-mentioned, of a hundred children and young perſons, who, by ſubſcribing each a penny a month, would ſecure to themſelves the benefit of five pounds annually, in the invaluable object of a properly ſelected, and perpetually increaſing Library. The number of pariſhes in England being not leſs than 9,790, there would, by means of one ſuch voluntary Inſtitution in each, be devoted to

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The progreſs of intellectual cultivation, virtue and happineſs, which may be expected by you as the conſequence, I leave with your own reflections.

the purpoſe yearly, and in a manner to be felt by none, the ſum of £. 48,950. In ten years only, the ſtores of uſeful knowledge, of which thoſe among us, who, in a ſtate of low and neglected cultivation, are from anceſtor to deſcendant, and from century to century, abandoned to the vices and miſeries of ignorance, would hence be capable of availing themſelves, and in which they would take the greater intereſt from having acceſs to them as their own, would, independently of donations and different occaſional contributions, amount to £. 89,500. The effect of this, when thus employed, in meliorating the condition of ſociety, needs no deſcription. I have been led to this ſtatement, becauſe, with a ſincere concern on the part of the leaders of the community, for its inſtruction and improvement, it is not leſs eaſily practicable, than it would be extenſively beneficial. It is, I know, ſmall, compared with the poſſible effects of wiſdom and benevolence, directed to the ſub-

You will conſider with yourſelves, in fine, the manner in which HE, whoſe name you bear, would have conducted himſelf in the period of the world in which you live, and ſituated, in other reſpects, in circumſtances ſimilar to your own: you will compare the principle and ſpirit, which conſtitute the ſpring of action within you, with thoſe which diſcriminated the object of your imitation. How trivial appear the generality of the characters we obſerve, when viewed on a compariſon with his! Had the time waſted in fruitleſs and and embittering anathemas, in different forms, againſt the diſbelievers in the miracles of

ject of education and inſtruction in general, and having, for their one boundleſs object, the advancement of the human mind and character to that juſt perfection, which conſiſts in the empire of truth, and virtue, and the univerſal happineſs. Let the mind be once awakened to the powers of education, and the effect muſt follow. The "grain of muſ-"tard ſeed," when ſown it is indeed "the leaſt of ſeeds," but afterwards it becomes "the greateſt of herbs."

Chriſt-

chriſtianity, or thoſe who have their doubts with reſpect to them, been devoted to the diligent cultivation, and the conſiſtent exerciſe of its ſpirit, ſcarcely could the contraſt between day and night be more apparent, than between what would then have been, and what at preſent is, the condition of the world in general. When I conſider the ſhortneſs of human life, together with its poſſible, probable, or certain dependencies, it is, I confeſs, with difficulty, that I refrain from aſtoniſhment at the abſurdities of men.

May every bleſſing attend you! May you have the genuine and conſiſtent philanthropy, the dignity and purity of ſentiment, and ſteadfaſt perſeverance, of the truly wiſe and good! May you be alike correct in mind and conduct; alike ſincere in inveſtigating truth, and in obeying it; and may it be with you, the object of life, to attain, as nearly as poſſible, the perfection of human character!

Confiding

Confiding, and exulting in the proſpect, that whether in the preſent, or in a future ſtate, there will to you, to myſelf, and to the ſpecies, be all the happineſs which it is in the power of Intelligence, under the influence of Benevolence, to impart; and that univerſally, whatever will be done, will be what we ourſelves ſhould do, had we the wiſdom and the power of the Supreme Diſpoſer of events; I remain, with great eſteem, and with a remembrance of kindneſs and attention, that can never be obliterated,

Your's ſincerely,

T. MARTIN.

Yarmouth, 26th June, 1797.